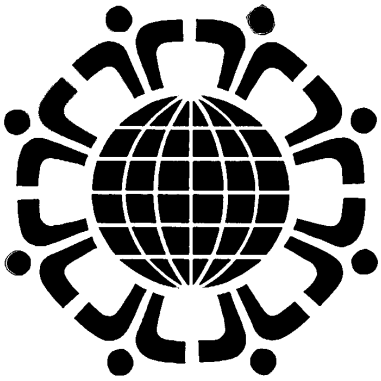
RESEARCH PROPOSAL

C.S. Lewis' Selected Autobiographical Writings: A Journey of Joy



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I. Tentative Title

C.S. Lewis' Selected Autobiographical Writings: A Journey of Joy

II. Research Problem

If doors are symbols of possible paths in life, then doorknobs are metaphors for permission and a lantern is the mark of a guide. A journey to an end, to fulfillment of purpose, is the drive of all sentient life, reflected in the literature of all ages. Stories of all genres - fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, novel, poetry, drama, children's literature, religious writings, letters, journals, biography, autobiography - all these genres in the end tell a story of achievement, of a desired end which brings satisfaction.

In this thesis, I will analyze a few selected works of C.S. Lewis which express not only the importance of embarking on a journey of joy, but also his self exploration as an individual who discovered meaning in that journey and went on to share it with his readers.

This makes several of Lewis' works a useful base upon which to investigate the following questions: What is the significance of a journey in life? How do C.S. Lewis' works influence and/or answer the quest for meaning? How does psychoanalysis explain this phenomenon? Why is Lewis' autobiography important in the search for significance? Can Lewis' works be taken as a guide for our own personal journeys? What place does the idea of joy have in this framework? And, what does the reader take away from their interaction with literature that facilitates the need for a journey?

In testing my hypothesis, I will examine and compare several selected accounts of Lewis' contribution to literature, analyzing them for their overall social and psychological implications in the context of their impact on the social psyche. I will include biographical and critical studies on Lewis' texts as well as several secondary resource materials in order to gain as wide an understanding of the impact of fantsy as a genre and the social effect of Lewis' interpretation and use of fantasy as literature.

III. Definition of Terms

Autobiography: Defined as the biography of oneself narrated by oneself, autobiographical works can take many forms, from letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences to a formal book-length autobiography. Formal autobiographies offer a special kind of biographical truth: a life, reshaped by recollection, with all of recollection's conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions. Author Clive Staples Lewis' autobiography *Surprised by Joy* (1955) is thus correctly subtitled, *'The Shape of My Early Life'*.

Journey: Journey in literature is a catalyst toward a hero's better understanding of his life and as a way to reveal what is truly important to other characters. Although journey is used to point out the greatness of a character, it can also illustrate that a hero many come in unexpected forms, even characters that may be considered physically weak.

Joy: Distinguished from happiness or pleasure, joy was, for Lewis, a defining characteristic of longing—a deep yearning or poignant desire for something agonizingly elusive. The underlying quality of joy in Lewis's system was "that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."

Sehnsucht: Taking root in the Middle Ages and reworked during Romanticism it had the essential meaning of "longing," "yearning," especially an agonized pining for that which is elusive. Lewis's English word for all this was Joy, a quality he distinguished from both Happiness and Pleasure.

IV. Background

"Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it."

- Greg Anderson, founder of Cancer Recovery Foundation International.

'Joy' comes from the Latin word meaning 'to be glad', but over the years it has taken on a stronger sense of rapture, of being uplifted, and we can all recognize the feeling even if we don't experience it very often. We want that experience, long for it to come to us, even just sometimes in our lives, and we search to recognize it in the lives of others.

For C.S. Lewis, joy took on a special meaning, a meaning that he pursued diligently throughout his life. Although he never wrote about joy in quite the same way that he did about faith, in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* he tells how he was finally overtaken by joy and was reluctantly converted to belief in a loving God.

In his other writings he records other moments of joy in such simple things as a simple toy made by his brother, in books, the countryside, friendship – the kinds of things we can all enjoy when we stop to look for them. None of Lewis' sources of joy requires material wealth, simply an open heart, a wealth of spirit and the recognition of the importance of the little things in life.

Surprised by Joy holds a special significance in the narrative of Lewis' life, being a first person account which cuts through secondary sources and interpretations on Lewis' early life, giving readers a clear look into instances of personal relevance that reveal more about the individual's choices and beliefs. Through this autobiography, then, it becomes easier to trace the evolution of the author's personality to gain a better understanding of the meaning of joy in Lewis' life.

It follows then, that in order to gain an understanding of the journey one could take towards an attainment of joy, we may be guided again by Lewis' own *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life*. In the Preface to the book, which is quite short, almost like a note to his readers, Lewis outlines why he wrote the book at all. He writes:

"This book is written partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity … How far the story matters to anyone but myself depends on the degree to which others have experienced what I call 'joy'."

By providing this outline, Lewis has at once told us that the story he is going to relate in the pages ahead is about his own journey towards a final meeting with joy, with several liberal annotations about his experiences with joy along the way. He has also said that the story is definitely his own and not a general or symbolic retelling of a possible or fictional life. He has given us, quite clearly, a look into the formative years of his identity that make him the person we recognize him to be today.

It is these formative years that make up the journey that every person searching for joy's particular fulfillment takes in order to achieve that highest level of satisfaction. Each journey then, is a quest for a higher purpose. To use an example from the stories of King Arthur which Lewis was intimately familiar with, each journey is a hunt, a personal quest for a desired end. Not all journeys are undertaken by knights; each individual, whether a king or a peasant, has his own quest in the path of life. The desired end may vary, but the feeling of satisfaction and achievement that comes at the end of the journey is the joy that we all search for.

Literature as a whole adds to this journey of joy. Every text we read is full of information we desire or discover, fulfilling a need to gain knowledge. Is is an essential building block in life's journey. C.S. Lewis once said:

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become."

Lewis, in telling his own story has the rare honour of being an author who recognised the lack of enrichment in our lives; a detachment from simplicity and ease. Instead of preaching the value of a wholistic life, however, he very humbly gives us accounts of his own life as an example and other stories that present the philosophical and moral difficulties he himself struggled with as guides to ease our way forward.

It is well known that trouble shared is trouble halved. By openly sharing his concerns with his readers, Lewis shows us that we are not alone in our struggles. He allows us to make our own decisions, mistakes and recoveries, never pushing for a goal, but simply illuminating the way forward.

In doing so, Lewis, through his works enables his readers to grow on their own, at their own pace, finding their own way just as he did. Along the way he shows us the small moments of joy we may have missed, giving us opportunities for recognising the same for future reference.

It is the art of the enchanter to open our eyes to new paths and possibilities, turning disbelief to belief, and scorn to trust. Lewis the enchanter uses the medium of his texts, particularly the fictional fantasy tales to slip the essence of his teachings through the guard of moral obtuseness, allowing us to reach our own conclusions while still enjoying the journey to whatever end we choose.

V. Research Methods

My research methodology would consist of close reading, interpreting and in-depth analysis of primary sources available by C.S. Lewis. I will also support my study with a significant number of critical writings which will deal with the topics under study here. My appraoch will be interdisciplinary and will consult some of the psychoanalytic theories to understand the interconnectedness of the human mind and the fantasy world of literature.

VI. Tentative Chapter Plan

The following is the tentative chapter plan for this research proposal:

Chapter 1. Introduction: About C.S. Lewis.

Chapter 2. Child narrators and fantasy tales: Perspective and Imagination.

Chapter 3. Reading through Psychology: Growth and Discovery.

Chapter 4. A Study of *'Surprised by Joy'*.

Chapter 5. Conclusion.

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